

INTERVIEWEE: ED PEARL

INTERVIEWER: Victor Cohen

DATE: February 15, 2009

EP: That's what would impress him. But just read a little bit more.

VC: So, just for the record, it's the 15th of February, and – just so I can keep track.

And I'm reading *The Essential Clarence White*. Who wrote the introduction here?

EP: Roland.

VC: Roland. His brother?

EP: Yeah, and his wife, who is the editor and obviously knows what she's doing. Not that Roland is not bright. He's really bright, but – [reading] Clarence hears his first solos.

VC: Gosh, look how young they are.

EP: Yes.

VC: That's unbelievable.

EP: I know.

VC: And that's Clarence White right there?

EP: Clarence in the middle.

VC: He's in the middle?

EP: Let me see. No, Clarence is on the end. Yeah, that's Clarence.

VC: He looks like he's sixteen.

EP: He is.

VC: They ended up playing for Andy Griffith?

EP: Yeah. Andy Griffith came to the Ash Grove quite a number of times.

VC: Really.

EP: Yeah, because he also knew Brownie McGee and Sonny Terry. That picture that made him famous, the one where he's a former convict that starts to get popular –

VC: Oh, *The Crowd*? The Elia Kazan one?

EP: Yeah, right. With that gorgeous Texan. What's her name? I forget. She died.

So, yeah, he always came for Brownie and Sonny. Do you know who his lover was?

VC: No.

EP: Don Knotts.

VC: Get outta here.

EP: They came all the time.

VC: Andy Griffith and Don Knotts?

EP: Yeah.

VC: I didn't know that.

EP: You didn't know he was homosexual?

VC: No idea. I didn't know Don Knotts was gay, either. You're not pulling my leg, are you?

EP: No, I'm not. I'm not.

VC: No idea.

EP: I think he's still living. He was really old, got old and fat. But he was a big guy anyway.

VC: So Clarence was teaching at the Ash Grove? Was that at the School of Traditional Music?

EP: Yeah. Well, I mean, he taught me. Also, which she doesn't mention, is that I employed Clarence to do carpentry work and stuff with me.

VC: No, she doesn't mention that.

EP: No. But, see, Roland was gone. Roland was in the army, so he missed a lot. He'll go into the army thing in a little while, but he was – in '62, just two years after we met – well, no, two and a half years, he was drafted. See, what Walt did, Walt Pittman, is, first he took me and Kate to see them at a club in Glendale or something, a bar. So I saw them actually, and then Roland called me. But Roland doesn't remember that. Doesn't matter. But all of the people – the country people were – well, it's interesting anyway. He had two careers. One through me and one through Joe Maphis, and Walt Pittman, and a couple of others like that. Really good people. Joe played the Ash Grove, Joe and Rose Lee. I thought I wouldn't like Joe.

VC: Joe Maphis?

EP: I really like him. I mean, because he's such a show-off. He can play faster than anybody that ever lived.

VC: He's an amazing –

EP: I know he is, but aside from that, he is a very sensitive, very nice, excellent guitarist. He would play so fast that even he stumbled a little bit. It didn't matter. People would – unless you're a guitar player, you can just sort of hear this blizzard. As usual, his wife was the one who kept things sane. They all drink too much and try to run around. She kept him pretty straight, though. Rose Lee. LeRoy was a great player. All of them were, really. It's really well written.

VC: Yeah. So by mid-1966 they had stopped playing together.

EP: Yeah. Then they reunited a couple times. There were other times when they were in the same city at the same time and they'd call me up, and I would hire them as the White Brothers, with Eric, his brother. If Billy was around, fine. If he wasn't, we could get the guy from the Country Gentlemen. I forget his name right now. Or whatever. Anyway, they played a number of times.

VC: Wow. They ended up pickin' behind Bill Munroe.

EP: Yeah. Roland was with Bill for a long time.

VC: That's amazing. Wow. There's a Clarence White online forum. Oh, and then, as it says, here's the new Kentucky Colonels?

EP: That was without Clarence, though. He was with the Byrds. It's probably the greatest loss to country guitar playing that ever happened is for Clarence to die so young. I mean it. I mean, there's still nobody that comes close to – nobody. Bush, all of those people, they don't – well, they know it, too. I mean, it's not like they don't understand that. I don't know any of them, but they make reference to him.

VC: It's amazing. So he was just standing by a car and some drunk hit him.

EP: Yeah. A lady. Eric called me. It was just horrible. I went to the funeral.

VC: That's awful.

EP: I didn't even know he and Susie had split up. And what's his name? What's the guy that – what's her name? Lou Harris.

VC: Emmy Lou Harris?

EP: Emmy Lou Harris was friends with, or lovers with – what's his name? The guy that died early. He's really famous now. Anyway, they were there. He always – anyway. It doesn't matter.

VC: Does Roland still play?

EP: Oh, yeah. He and Ry and Mike Seeger were the trio. They did old-time songs at the reunion. It was Ry's idea. Let's listen to Clarence.

VC: Oh, yeah. I'd love to hear it. Since we're talking about Mance Lipscomb, I found a Mance Lipscomb CD and bought it. He's amazing. He's great.

EP: Yeah. He could play anything.

VC: Unbelievable.

EP: He did. I mean, he would play – I don't want to break it, but –

VC: Maybe it comes out this side. You gotta open it right here.

[guitar music playing]

EP: Can you hear what he's doing?

VC: It's so fluid. How did he learn how to play like that? He just –

EP: Oh, he did it himself from childhood. He learned from everybody. He goes into it there. He was able to copy everybody. He's talking about when Clarence was like twelve, that he always wanted to do his own songs. Did you read the part where he played his first solos at the Ash Grove?

VC: Yeah.

EP: I remember that. I remember him asking me if he could do it.

VC: He was like, "Nah, I don't do solos"?

EP: No, no. He asked me if it would be okay if he played a solo.

VC: Oh, really.

EP: Which brings me to your comment about Old Left and New Left. That's true in terms of the era, but it's not true in terms of the Ash Grove. The Ash Grove is neither

Old nor New Left, because the main thrust of the Ash Grove was the music and the culture of rural – well, of working class white and African Americans, workers. And the out front politics were derived from their lives, always. So people could have whatever politics they wanted to. It added dimension to them.

And also, that's why I wanted to talk about audiences. You had all these kids, whether they're New, Old, or Beatnik, or whatever they were, and they had to rub shoulders with country people, who in turn had to rub shoulders with them. And the same with blacks and whites together, and Jews, and so on. I mean, it created a society in the Ash Grove so that people were always respectful. There were no incidents of racial anything. Also, it was old and young, so you had very old people and very young people. I mean, people who came to hear their music often were quite old, from the country. "From the country" meaning from other places and who had moved here for economic reasons. And this was their music and these were their heroes, and they came. Yeah, I had Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs, and so on. And we were proud of people like Clarence.

So there was a lot of – you know. But it was joyful. There never was an incident of any kind. As a matter of fact, there were only about four or five fights in the Ash Grove's history. And I was involved in three of them. I'm serious. I'm dead serious.

VC: I believe you.

EP: I mean, it just didn't happen.

VC: People were just really there for the music.

EP: Yeah. I told you of that incident – maybe I didn't – of the famous motorcycle gang, the big –

VC: Oh, the Hell's Angels? No.

EP: Hell's Angels decided they liked the Ash Grove. (laughs) They liked the blues. I'm serious. Anna tells it beautifully. Anna tells the story. But I had my own story because – I mean, on the film, Anna talks about Hell's Angels when she was working in like '68.

VC: So, later.

EP: Yeah, '67, '68, '69. The leader, the guy – I don't know, whoever he was. I can't remember his name now. He was enormous, of course. He asked if he could talk to me, and he says, "I love the Ash Grove. The thing is, I get excited, and when I get excited I like to break chairs." He says, "So, listen. I'll pay you for the chairs." (laughs) So I said, "Well, thank you. That's very nice. But, you see, the thing is, these are Bentwood chairs and you can't replace them." He was really crestfallen. Obviously, I didn't have the power to control twelve giants. But a chair was never broken. (laughs) Except by sitting on it, maybe, you know, once in a while. Bentwood chairs could stand a lot, but when they're twelve years old you start getting –

VC: Yeah, right. So they started hanging out once you started having electric –

EP: Yeah. There was a period, and then it was just occasional after the first – well, for particular acts. They liked Canned Heat, they liked – their kind of thing. John Lee Hooker.

VC: Did they ever play together at the Ash Grove, John Lee Hooker and Canned Heat?

EP: Yes. Yeah, they did.

[guitar music still playing]

VC: He's amazing. His guitar playing is unreal.

EP: See, what he has that others don't have, he has tonality and control of volume and pulse. He has pulse like nobody I've ever seen. It has nothing to do with how fast he plays. The best guitar accompanist I've ever heard. Well, Doc, too. It's really different, because Clarence is like more modern than Doc. And Doc really – one time, when Clarence was – see how he highlights things?

VC: Yeah.

EP: He doesn't miss _____.

VC: No. It's so fluid. Every statement is like that long. It starts here and –

EP: And that wide, because he's playing the full range of _____. Beautiful. This is from later on, because he's doing a couple things here that I haven't heard. I know this piece extremely well. And this one.

VC: Yeah, right. Doc Watson plays the these songs, too, right?

EP: Oh, yeah, Doc is brilliant. I mean, Clarence never had the years to come up to where Doc was.

VC: I recognize these songs from what I've heard of Doc Watson.

EP: Oh, he's doing a medley here. Because one tune goes right to another.

[pause – guitar music playing]

EP: That's also a show _____ tune for Dan, because then they go into _____ faster.

When Scotty was with them, Clarence had somebody – Scotty Stoneman, he could play the fiddle as well as he plays the guitar. I got them together. Now, you see, he's doing that chord stuff. That's really nice. That is something you develop later. The Stoneman family played the Ash Grove in 1964.

VC: The who?

EP: The Stoneman family.

VC: Stoneman?

EP: Stoneman. Pop Stoneman was a very well known musician in the twenties and thirties. And, of course, then was rediscovered. And his children, Ronny, who became the star of *Hee Haw*, and Scotty, who was a drunk but the best – the most gifted singer I should say I've ever known. And – oh, I forget her name. Beautiful, beautiful. His youngest daughter, who was kind of a star. She played _____. Ronny played banjo. She was a perfect one for *Hee Haw*. She looked funny, she was funny, she could make funny faces, she could play like a bitch. So she was – that's the only reason I ever watched *Hee Haw*.

VC: I was going to say, I didn't think you'd be a big fan of *Hee Haw*.

EP: Well, it's not being a fan. These are people I know. These are my friends. So I watched them. But I watched to see _____, just to – anyway, so Scotty got off into a drinking binge and the family just left him. There he was, in the Ash Grove, with me. And he had no place to go. He had no – apparently, he'd spent all his money.

So I let him stay there, which was a mistake because he drank up bottles of wine. And for nourishment, it was horrible, he ate a whole five-gallon jug of mayonnaise. Or, I think it was a gallon. Whatever it was, he was _____. I didn't know what to do with him, so I called Roger of the Colonels, and he and Clarence and, I don't know, three of them came down, or Roland, I can't remember. And with somebody else who had some knowledge about how to deal with – where to take him, to a hospital. So they did. And while he was recovering, part of his recovery was playing again, because he was staying at somebody's house. I got him out of the Ash Grove. Then he became part of

the band for a while, and it was fabulous. The music they made was just incredible. This guy could play all this stuff while lying flat on the floor. Drunk or sober, it didn't matter. He died young, of course.

[pause – guitar music]

VC: How old was he when he was making this, do you think? Late twenties?

EP: Oh, this stuff? Yeah, from late twenties to mid-thirties. Then he was killed. When the Ash Grove burnt down for the final time, one of my _____ a couple of days _____ so they were glad that Clarence had died before the place burned down. It was like just one tragedy after another. Also, another young friend of mine died of cancer. I mean, at that point he was like twenty-three or something like that. Yeah, it was really – and I sort of – he and his girlfriend and another friend of theirs had come into my world, and I wound up taking care of him to a certain extent. I mean, he had a family, and whatnot, but I took him down to Mexico and tried to get him laetrile. And we did get him laetrile. It prolonged it for a little while, but not long. And he died. Then I fell in love with his girlfriend, who was sixteen. We were together for a while. I just saw her. She came to the Ash Grove _____. She's been living in Seattle. It was really great seeing her. _____. We spent a day together, which was good.

But anyway, Clarence – they were all great musicians, but he was just very special. _____.

VC: Who would be coming to see these people, when they would play there? Like, just everyone?

EP: Yeah. Well, the band was so good, and they were so funny, and really excellent music. And they're the same age, and they could play better than all the kids that were

trying to play like them anyway. That was the magic of it. So, there was – the dominance of the music during that period was just so strong that, even though other things, and myself, related to what was going on in the world _____ their world, or the world that I created, was dominated by music and politics, to everybody seen through the culture, honoring the culture _____. It was very different than any other place. I mean, it affected people with all kinds of politics. I mean, you mean by new politics, you don't mean sectarian politics, you mean the more broader, touchy, feely, and so on. So there were all kinds of people. But a lot of people didn't get it. People got it in different degrees. I think the country people and the blues people were affected more than – the performers and the people who came to see them were affected more than the Left, to be honest about it.

VC: What do you mean by that?

EP: Well, I'll give you an example. One night – I can't remember who was playing, but he or she was great. And there was this whole group of Ash Grove people that were now in their twenties that I knew from demonstrations and from the Ash Grove. I went over and I said, "Hey, what are you guys doing sitting here? So-and-so's on stage." And they said – they were all drinking beer, and they said, "We're working class. This is what working class people do." (laughs) I mean, it was really great music, and they were sitting there getting completely drunk in the front room, but the guy said, "That's what working class people do." Because they actually _____ people had quote/unquote "industrialized" and they'd become factory.

VC: Was this in the later sixties?

EP: Well, in the early seventies. When they had industrialized, they were living in,

you know, where U.S. Steel was, Downey, places like that. And they were in RCP. That group was RCP. But there were other groups. But also including the one that I related to for a little while, the IS, they come from a different world. Political music. Or rock-n-roll. And I had nothing to do with rock-n-roll. I can't remember who it was. Oh, yeah, I was with Jack Weinberg and we were talking about doing a benefit for Peace and Freedom, and he said, "Well, what about Johnny Rivers?" I'd never heard Johnny Rivers in my life, but I knew that there was somebody named Johnny Rivers who was popular. So I sort of – I don't know what I said.

But, actually, I had nothing to do with that. I had no interest in that. I had no interest in 90 percent of the rock music that came out. None of it. Zero. I made my choice – I mean, it never even occurred to me – I mean, first of all, I made my choice, or I was affected by music that has long, deep roots very early on and I'd stuck with it. And I don't really much care for – I'm happy the Rolling Stones came in, but I almost never listened to their music, never did. It's just a different thing.

VC: Right. You weren't a Beatles fan?

EP: I profoundly appreciated the Beatles because, actually, their arrangements and the sophistication, the messages in their songs, was really excellent. Of course, I recognize the mass implications of what they were doing, because they were part of – they built a movement that defined the culture of the next generation of people in this country. I liked their records, yeah, I did. I don't know if I'd like it now. I mean, they play it on KCSN every Saturday from – or Sunday from ten to one, I think. It's sort of boring after a while. But not this, what we just heard.

VC: Because it's not rooted in a popular trend?

EP: Well, there is no culture that that sustains. It's sort of like the Beatles belong to a certain time. Because we're so rootless. We don't have oral tradition, our families are broken apart. You see this little book there? They're going from family to family, and people stay at other people's homes and all that. That's a culture. That's common courtesy. That's what you do. Walt Pitman, simply because he's a country person, made sure that I was aware of these wonderful players, and so on. He took it upon himself to do that. He didn't do it for any money, he was just a man, he was just a guy.

VC: Did anyone ever look twice at you because you were Jewish and all these people were from Christian and country?

EP: I don't know. I really don't. It never came up.

VC: I didn't think it did, but –

EP: The thing is, I always encouraged people who played gospel songs because then they weren't doing show music, they were doing something they really believed in. You know, black and white. It was great. And I did talk Bill Munroe and Bessie Jones into doing songs together.

VC: So when people would come play at the Ash Grove, did they expect to find, early on – like there it says they were kind of nervous because, like you said –

EP: I don't know. I really don't know. But I had all the elements of welcome. Carroll Perry for black people, and for southerners in general. He knew how to cook what they liked and was very magnanimous and welcoming. He would take people to the right hot dog places, and soul food. He knew where they liked to go.

VC: That was your cook?

EP: Well, Carroll cooked when it was special cooking like that, and otherwise he was

semi-manager of the kitchen. He worked at the Ash Grove from very early on, '58 through '65 or something, '66. For eight years, or something like that. Then he became the ill-fated manager of the Chambers Brothers, which took him out of L.A., and they dumped him. They betrayed him, really, for a hot-shot manager, which ruined their lives for the rest of their – seriously.

VC: Really.

EP: Oh, yeah, definitely. And ultimately their careers. I mean, they had – but they were Mississippi kids and they had a taste of the good life and they wanted it. I remember one time asking them, I said, "You know, if you make this choice, what would you rather do? The great music, gospel music, and so on, of your culture or this commercial stuff?" They looked at me and said – and I could tell that they wanted the commercial stuff. (laughs) I mean, it was like an epiphany for me because I was a true believer, before I was sophisticated. This was '63, '64.

Even crazy Lester recognized the real value of the Ash Grove always, and what I was doing. Like when Peace and Freedom began, and I was sort of – I can't remember my title. I was the – well, I headed the drive to get us on the ballot here in Los Angeles County. So they brought their parents down to sign up for Peace and Freedom, and they all signed up for Peace and Freedom. It was that kind of a relationship.

And the Chambers family would come after a while, on Sundays, and perform with the brothers. Because it was respectful, and because it was – I mean, I recognized the quality of the music. The hymns are beautiful, and the singing is gorgeous, and both black and white. So I always encouraged that. And they gradually felt totally comfortable in doing that, even though people were drinking wine. And

everything was fun and respectful and made money, as much as anyone did.

Which is not to say that a lot of political stuff was taking place around, because the Ash Grove, just in general, was a very exciting gathering place for people that were trying to change the world.

VC: When you said earlier that the musicians were really affected by the –

EP: Yeah. It's not only the musicians but the cultures that they came from. I went on our trip to New Orleans to do Free Southern Theater. We stopped off at Mance's house and we had dinner with them, and so on. He showed me that he had kept clippings from the *Los Angeles Times* and the flyers that I sent out with his name on it, and he had made copies of these things and put them around town. Then, all the younger people started wanting to hear him because he was a star, he had made it in Hollywood. I'm dead serious about that. The Stanley brothers told me the same thing about how happy they were to be in Hollywood, and they kept everything like that and took it home.

I'm just saying that it wasn't only in – well, certainly not in Los Angeles when we lost track of these great players, but they were lost track of completely in their own homes. I mean, John Hurt, it doesn't matter, all of them, except for a few people like Bill Munroe. Certainly all the acoustic players. And Chicago Blues had taken place. I mean, within the black community, the country music, it was looked on as Hanky-heads, and things like that. Well, Hanky came by and showed us a photograph of them.

Bessie Jones and the Georgia Sea Islanders, same thing. They'd been playing for the white people – Sea Island is composed of St. Simon Island, the other half is Sea Island. St. Simon's the black area and the Sea Island part was stolen from the blacks after – they were freed blacks in the first place, they had the whole island. The Sea Island

resorts would hire people from St. Simon to do dances and songs for the rich white folks in the resorts. And with Bessie and the group, St. Simon Island dancers and singers would perform not only in the white thing, but they could now perform in their black community. They did anyway in church, but they actually could do a concert.

But it meant a lot that people knew that their music was being played all the way across the country, like another world. And the stories they would tell. They talked a lot about it. When I went to Newport in, I guess '65, we flew to Newport from New Orleans and back because we wanted to see that. And that's when Bob Dylan played electric and all that.

Anyway, I was walking to something or other and I hear, "Ed, Ed, Ed." I turn around and there's John Hurt and he's coming up to me with a woman. He wanted to introduce me to his wife. And she started telling me all the things that he had done in Los Angeles. So he really valued that time with us.

So anyway, that's what I meant. It's a tribute to possibilities, larger possibilities, for other people. People can change and are happy to do so once they go into an environment where there's nothing threatening them, and they're respected. Actually loved. Then they change. I don't know who's racist. I knew that Carter Stanley was racist, but still, he was extremely friendly and nice. I don't know how that affects this, but anyway, I wanted to say that.

VC: No, no. It's helpful. One of the questions I've been thinking about is why this music was so powerful at that point in time to that audience, and also the effect it had – I mean, certainly, musicians were looking for a place to play, and people were looking for a place to hear the music, but the power it seemed to have, and the world that the Ash Grove

developed, it's almost like it doesn't quite add up to everything. It was larger than the sum of its parts. There was something about the way the music was presented, as well as there being that kind of venue, that seems to be –

EP: Like an oasis. It really was. It really was an oasis.

VC: It seems to have bolstered people's – like you just said, the possibilities for something, as opposed to it just being a club, where you go see music.

EP: Well, I was speaking about the society in general. The possibilities that now exist, the potential _____, which is why these little events that I'm doing now mean a lot more than potentially. The problem I've always had with anything I've ever done is nobody else seems to do it. It's really true. I'm not happy about that. It's not like I take great pleasure in being unique. Because it's complicated. It has to be – you have to be able to pay people, but you can't make money. You can't consider profit in the kind of thing that I'm doing, and I've done.

And that has its own problems, always, starting again and again and again with nothing. Literally nothing. If UCLA had not given me the whole ballgame for nothing, basically – you didn't have to pay for anything, including publicity. They had their own publicity staff. They took an appropriate share out of the gate. We still made money from UCLA. I was able with those two Royce Hall concerts to put on twelve or fifteen free things, and so made several thousand dollars from it. Plus, they took out for paying for the publicity and for this and that, and so on and so forth, the parking and the rest of it. Even so – because they charge a lot. That's a once in a lifetime thing, maybe.

(laughs) I can't make it with a hundred, I don't know who I'd present even if I made it, on the other hand.

But anyway, it was a very important time, and it was before – I don't know. I always wonder – I could not but become political in '67. On the other hand, I realized – I was sitting in my office, and I can't remember what it was, but I had the opportunity – I can't remember – Taj called out of the blue and he wanted to know whether he should do something or not, and I was already involved in a political thing, and I just sat there and I realized that I had a choice to make. I realized that I kind of had a respective position in music, and I knew that if I sustained that and built that, that it would be important. But I made the choice to go into politics. So I did.

I don't know, really, whether that was a mistake or not. I don't quite see how I could have – it would have been impossible to keep letting the Ash Grove be done for other things when I knew that I could make the Peace and Freedom Party exist, or not.

VC: Why the Peace and Freedom Party? Why was that the thing you decided to do?

EP: Well, because it was there. I mean, it was happening. We'd been asked for some money to help and it sounded like a good thing, you know, for peace and for freedom, equality, and so on.

VC: Right. Good things.

EP: The first meeting I went to, there were a tremendous number of people. There must have been over a hundred people in this place. I can't remember where it was. And they didn't know what they were doing, literally. Interrupting each other and – it was just chaos. They didn't seem to know what they were doing. In other words, there was this movement, anxiety about the war in Vietnam, about Johnson's escalating the war with no end. College people were being drafted. The draft was happening. I mean, it was clear that we had a choice to make.

And the Freedom Movement had reached a real crisis, you know, after the '64 convention, with Fannie Lou Hamer and so on being relegated to a separate organization. And nothing happening there. I mean, there was some good things that Johnson had done, the Civil Rights Act, and whatnot, but in '66 all of the peace candidates, Robert Scheer and others, lost in the Democratic Party, and it was clear that the Democratic Party was supporting Johnson. And Hubert Humphrey was no better, you know, an anti-communist. And they had stiffed the Southern Freedom Movement, and King was – I think he'd already been to Chicago and people were – it was a very difficult time. So this seemed like a very important thing.

So I just got involved in it, just because I made some suggestions which were accepted, and then I got offered the job because it was clear I knew how to promote a big thing. And nobody else did.

VC: And that was in '67?

EP: Yeah. We got on the ballot by December 31st, 1967. In L.A. County, under my guidance, we got thirty-seven thousand registrations, out of the state, and we needed something like ninety thousand and got like a hundred and two, or something like that. It was tremendous. So it was a big triumph until Bobby Kennedy and what's-his-name from Minnesota, the other one. Peter Yarrow's father-in-law. Kennedy and – who was the other person?

VC: I forgot. I don't know. I should.

EP: He's still living. Anyway. So Kennedy's entrance into the fray, just immediately people saw the possibility of actually winning something, rather than building something. We were trying to build a movement, and for better or worse, we made allies with the

Black Panther Party, which also was a struggle, and they took their _____, making a unity and making a coalition.

VC: You said the Black Panthers – you had Elaine Brown on stage?

EP: Yeah. That was a little later. She wasn't around then. She was still living somewhere else. Baltimore. I can't remember where she comes from. Atlanta. I don't think she was that political at that point.

But anyway, it was clear that I couldn't do both. So for a while I concentrated on building the party for about several months, three or four months. I was doing that, and my manager, Sandy Getts[?], who is no longer living, a wonderful, great – somebody I was very close to, she ran the thing. She did well, so that was fine. But anyway, these things – you know, life intrudes on the best intentioned plans. I mean, we still were doing the same – I would come in once a week and help that, but it was just different. Or more than once a week. A couple of times a week maybe, and sign checks and – I don't know. Whatever.

VC: So for all those reasons you mentioned, that's what made you sort of decide you had to do something? Or was there one event that really kind of crystallized it?

EP: I can't remember a particular event. It was just a huge build-up. Kate and I had flown up and gone to the, I guess, second antiwar march, from Berkeley to Oakland. We got attacked by the Hell's Angels and all that. There was a big conference up there, a big antiwar conference, right in the student union, right at Berkeley. I met Jerry Rubin. We went to – what was he doing before? I can't remember. He was doing something before and somehow – it was something like we finally met after never meeting till then. That was in '65 again, when we got back after – yeah, it was '65, in December. I think there

was an earlier march from Columbia, or something like that. I can't remember. They claimed the first one or something.

It was really great. My political juices were deeply stirred by that. Just by accident, we were taking a break from the crowds and we were sitting in the student lounge, and then a whole group of people came and sat around us. And it was the leadership of the entire event. So we participated. I told you my wife had money, so she wound up giving a lot of money to that. It just was – it was happenstance. We were just sitting there. I mean, not that we took any leadership role in that, but it got me going on how important it was. It was just an intellectual part that had not been fully exercised. Because I always had the same beliefs, so I started thinking in that direction.

VC: Did that change how you booked the club, or what you did with the club?

EP: Well, yeah. I wanted – not at first, but I wanted, on a grander scale – first of all, like I said, Peace and Freedom sort of imploded after – in 1968 it really started going down like to the next April.

VC: How come?

EP: Well, because of Kennedy and McCarthy, Gene McCarthy, had come into the fray, and people had peeled off. It became more and more difficult to see how we were leading a mass movement, after the registration drive had ended and we had this huge number of registrations. We had a convention like in February. I think on the day that we opened the convention, either McCarthy or Kennedy had – I think Gene McCarthy had announced he's running against Johnson. So the enervation began then.

So by that summer of '68, or maybe it was a little later, Christmastime. I remember it was a vacation period. I called together a number of people. We were living

in the Palisades at that point. I called a meeting of a number of people in Peace and Freedom to tell them that I thought that we could do some kind of show that would relate to the Antiwar Movement, or the Free Speech Movement, or something. Because there'd be music and we could do slide shows, a circular thing, and tape recordings, and whatnot. There were many more media to use. And there was music. Country Joe and the Fish. There was music that _____, whatever. We could do all of this stuff.

It turned out that the people I called, to the best of my knowledge, there were only one or two artists, and it turned out that everyone, almost everyone, had some serious art interest, in that group, which was quite surprising, to me. So we actually created and put on an incredible show, complete with Gorilla Theater. And when people came in they were given – and then the San Francisco State strike happened. So we chose that, because it was happening. A couple of people went up there and photographed the thing, so we had slide show photographs of the whole thing. Danny Gray, who was one of the leaders of that, actually comes from Los Angeles, so I knew him, because he was an Ash Grove person. I knew him before he went up there to go to San Francisco State College. He wound up being the head of the strike.

VC: How did you know him? Just from –

EP: From the Ash Grove.

VC: He was just hanging out?

EP: Yes. So anyway, we decided to do that. People were given a little picket sign, like an ice cream stick with a little piece of paper there, with the ten demands.

Everything was in tens, by the way. We had ten demands. Of the strikers. And there was a carousel slide show going on, with the sound of various – Hayakawa and Danny

and a number of other people. There was a huge timeline along one of the walls of when the whole thing started. First of all, it started with the elements around San Francisco State College. It's in the black community, of course. At that time, it didn't occur to me until Columbia and – that's of course where colleges were able to expand to, to poorer communities. And the number of black people, and so on and so forth. So it was a timeline with a lot of graphics underneath it, clearly outlined.

People came in and they got this sort of tour in the front room, and then they'd go into the back and Country Joe and the Pitchell Players, who are like a mime troupe sort of, who do the same, you know, but very funny, and from up in San Francisco. And that was the show and it went on for ten days. It was a hugely successful thing. And when people would be leaving, we had – parenthetically, I might remind you this is only – the shows before were blues, or whatever, the same stuff I was doing, and the shows designed for afterward were the same. We never got to the afterwards – anyway, we did this thing for ten days. We ended on a Sunday night. When people got out from the show inside, then we had discussion groups and people really talked about it. It was really interesting. We'd go on for an hour. Were people really energized by the exhibit, and all of that. It was a really interesting dynamic. And a very great show. Because I wanted to start creating shows that bespoke my confused, crazy, city culture, but in this struggle for peace and freedom.

VC: So the Peace and Freedom –

EP: It was not the Peace and Freedom Party. Everyone was already, Forget about the party. Well, some people stayed in it. I stayed in it until – I don't know. I stayed in it – first of all, I ran Cleaver's campaign here in Los Angeles County, so up until the election,

then I basically forgot about it. Because I went to the convention, which was – already the nuts were starting to take over, the same people that were yelling when I first entered. They just – it was pathetic. They don't know what they're doing. So it exists on paper, but it doesn't mean anything anymore. There's nothing there.

VC: When was that show?

EP: Well, that show was in the beginning of '69. So it ended on a Sunday after a ten-day run. And I was burned down on like a Tuesday. The Saturday after the show was – during the day, I had allowed the Ash Grove to be used by a group that was – the Socialist Workers Party and some other group that were going to be debating Cuba, and I was burned down for that reason.

VC: So the ten-day show happened –

EP: And then like two or three days later it was burned down.

VC: And then, in between then, the SWP and someone else was having a debate about Cuba.

EP: No. The SWP was supposed to have a debate the Saturday after the Sunday of the Pitchell Players and Country Joe's appearance.

One of the humorous incidents. On the first day that we were inside the Ash Grove. We were allowed to be inside the Ash Grove, because it was pretty thoroughly burned. I was standing there in the middle of, you know, blackened everything, and so on. Country Joe comes in, "Hey, Ed," he says. "I really need some money. I wonder, could you loan me –" I said, "Joe, look around you." "What?" I said, "Joe, look around you. That'll be your answer."

VC: He was serious?

EP: Yeah. He came to borrow twenty bucks or something from me. (laughs) _____ and my life is in ruins. He was so out of it. I don't know. He was really cut off short.

VC: So, was it the –

EP: There was a phone call. I can no longer verify this because I've forgotten who it was, but somebody called KPFK to say that they did it.

VC: No kidding.

EP: They were the Alpha – the group that lost at the Bay of Pigs. I can't remember – Alpha 66 or something like that. So that's what happened that time. And the same group did it the second time – people from the same milieu, the Right Wing Cuban army-type, military.

VC: I had no idea they'd be in L.A. I mean, I guess that was still –

EP: Oh, yeah. No, no. There are a lot of Cubans that live here. From Cuba. Yeah. I mean, L.A. is as warm as Miami. Not quite, anymore. But also, everyone wants to come here.

VC: So what did you do? I don't want to take up your time, but it's kind of pivotal. Just so you know, it's four-forty.

EP: Sandy and I went to meet Mr. Morrison, our landlord, and we talked to him and he was kind enough, nice enough to say we could stay. He had insurance for the thing, and I had some insurance for this thing. I got a ten thousand dollar gift from somebody. And we rebuilt. It wasn't completely destroyed. The third fire completely destroyed everything. But at least the back part was completely ruined, and it took – well, actually, the fellow, Peter Lockhart, is coming tomorrow, or Tuesday actually he'll be here. We're going to do some little thing together. But then he's taking my record book up because

they want to copy it. So first of all, they can use it as a reference so they don't have to be calling me to find out when so-and-so played. Because he's running into all kinds of – I get like two emails a day, because they can't identify a guitar player, whatever. So this will make it easier. So he's going to take that up to San Francisco, carry it in a secure box with him.

VC: Are you sure you don't want to copy it before you send it up?

EP: Well, it bothers me a little bit. I don't want to – I trust him. I mean, unless he gets into an airplane accident. Anyway, he said he was going to be here Tuesday. What was I saying? What was your question? I can't remember.

VC: I was just asking about after the fire, what you did.

EP: Well, we just rebuilt it. It took two or three months. Then we reopened, I think with New Lost City Ramblers. Kind of starting over again.

VC: Did that slow your politics down, or change your view about how to do anything?

EP: No. It gave me time to take a stab at joining IS, which didn't work out.

VC: Why did you join IS in '69?

EP: Well, I guess the thing that most affected that was my relationship with Jack Weinberg, that we had become good friends and I so admired him and his courage, as well as his politics, his excellent, powerful analyses. We were actually very close friends. My wife and I had separated, and I kind of fell for somebody who was in IS, so I joined.

VC: That's a good enough reason.

EP: Yeah. Well, it isn't. I mean, intellectually it was wonderful, and I learned a lot, but some of their positions were very rigid. None of them, none of them were really

connected to the life that I'd been leading. They were political people. So it was already an ill fit from that point of view. It didn't come out of my experience. I can't – like Sam Parver, who thinks there should be a revolution in Cuba – if he were there he'd be trying to lead it, he'd be in jail and he'd be proud of it. I mean, he's Cuban on top of it. He's a near genius, but none of them understand how slowly people change, or the many levels that people have and how to do that. So my experience on that level was really inapplicable there, and they had not had that experience on their own, so they were just different. But intellectually, just purely intellectually, it was very exciting. It just didn't work out.

So we worked and we rebuilt, and we opened. But there were other things I started doing. I put too much attention I think on creating other – well, I started doing the same kind of shows around prisons, the Black Panther Party, the Hazard. That's one thing that was really strike. The Hazard strike. Because I had – I forget his name – Tucker, a great storyteller, unionist, was one of the performers. And Hazel Dickens performed. She played the mother in the thing that – I can't remember the story, but it's the story of Loretta Lynn, I think. And Alice Gerard. Hazel and Alice were great singers, mountain singers who were together for a while as singers, singing duo. So they performed. And I think the Ramblers, or at least Mike Seeger for sure was there, but I think maybe the Ramblers were there. We showed the *High Lonesome Sound*, John Cohen's film. And we had stories of the strike going on, and so on. So it was really a great show.

VC: When was that?

EP: That was like '71. Seventy-two maybe. Seventy-one, '72. So we did some shows

like that, but then there were some really – a whole new thing came up with the Johnny Otis review. Johnny asked a mutual friend to talk to me to see if I'd be interested. So I said sure. So he brought in Big Mama Thornton and Big Joe Turner and – what's the name of the great guitarist from Kansas City? Walker.

VC: T-Bone Walker?

EP: Yeah, T-Bone Walker. And a number of other people. Curtis Tilman, Eddie Cleanhead Vinson. So I got into rhythm and blues. It was so great. I mean, it was so much fun. I mean, you know, it's not _____, (laughs) but really it is. I mean, if you knew Big Joe, you know him as a person, he really is really back there. And the local musicians, the ones that had been there for a while, like Curtis and Eddie Cleanhead, they knew about the Ash Grove, so they – it was love at first sight. And they played in one configuration or another over the next three or four years, till the end. In different ways. I mean, I hired Big Mama separately, I hired T-Bone Walker separately, I hired Eddie. And Curtis, he was a bass player, he played for a lot of people. He got hooked up with Bernie and played. So that opened a new thing for me. That started in '69. Not so much country music. Country music just kind of had gone its separate ways. I brought in Doc a couple times a year, with Merle now.

VC: His son.

EP: Yeah. He wasn't with Freddie and Clint anymore. I mean, they were still friends, but the last time I saw them Fred, the fiddler, Fred Price had died. Clint was still living but not doing so well. Doc is now aged. He's booked now, by the way, for that almost bluegrass thing up in San Francisco. So if he makes it, we're probably going to go up there and try to film him.

VC: Wow. No kidding.

EP: Yeah, about the Ash Grove.

VC: Wow. That'd be great.

EP: Yeah. Him, Earl Scruggs, and Del McCoury, this bluegrass guy, who was Bill's lead singer years ago. Del brought his sons to the Ash Grove on the pier and told me Ash Grove stories. I said now when I meet people I haven't seen for a long time, they have all these stories they remember from when they played. So it really meant something to them. Oh, when I was there, by the way, we put on –

VC: At the pier, you mean.

EP: In '96, '97. We had the remnants of – what was the name of the band from Texas? Real famous band. The leader is dead.

VC: Where'd they play?

EP: No, it was a huge orchestra, like with violins and everything. It was the – something of the Golden West, or something like that. Not Hank Williams. I mean, I knew who Hank Williams was. But I can't remember. Anyway, so these guys came – the musicians, when they came to me, they wanted to talk to me. They said that they had heard about the Ash Grove from the time they were like twenty years old. You know, these guys that were now – whatever. Twenty, thirty years ago. Thirty years before then. And they were so happy about it. They knew this one, they knew – everyone knows everyone in country music. They really do. They travel around and they know everyone. It's like you can see from even reading this, even the country boys. Yeah, they all knew each other, and they all – that's what they'd talk about. The time I was there, blah, blah, whatever. It was good. So they looked forward to it.

We drew an astounding crowd of people. The biggest, the tallest white people I've ever seen in my life. I mean, there were at least eight or nine seven-footers. I'm not kidding. The place was jammed. Five hundred people I can fit into that place there. Standing and dancing. And they'd come from as far away as Bakersfield. And Fresno, even. Some couples told me they'd come down from Fresno. And drink? Jesus Christ. They just had a great time.

So, yeah. I don't know. It's too bad I never was able to ride on that magic that we had built, you know, in a continual way. I missed out. I literally missed out on the opportunity to make free money. Like I should have started a record company right away, because there was a period where I could have gotten anyone I wanted. Dylan wanted to come play the Ash Grove. He put up – he says in his book that he'd seen the photographs, and that's all he wanted to do was to come and play the Ash Grove because it had all these great people.

VC: Really. He never did?

EP: Well, no. He missed. He was engaged, and then he called me up and said he had an opportunity to record. So I said sure, go ahead record, we'll do it next year. So I did next year, but he opened for Joan Baez at the Hollywood Bowl. He was supposed to play in '62. Instead it was '63 when we –

VC: Yeah, that would have been a –

EP: Yeah. I mean, it's not that I could have had Dylan, I'm not talking about that. But there were so many people I could have had. I might have had Dylan, but I'm just saying I wasn't thinking about that.

So I never did any of that stuff. I just didn't think that way. I was too

engaged in carrying out the garbage and making sure the place survived. I wasn't enough of a businessman. That's my major failing, I think.

VC: I don't know if businessmen would have approached making the Ash Grove the same way.

EP: Well, I know that. Right. But still, I could have – I mean, somebody wanting to start a record company but didn't have the time. And I was sort of afraid of it. I mean, anyway, I just didn't do it. So I didn't see that essential component. I didn't understand that a record company would mean that I could have a sustaining, ongoing reservoir of money to do things, so I've been scratchin'. Which is okay, I mean, I'm not dead. I'm still doing fine. But I'm just saying it could have been infinitely easier. I could have built the right kind of a place, you know, built out. Because the landlord was willing to sell me the buildings for a hundred thousand dollars, and I could have had a five hundred seater right there, just where I'd started.

And, of course, Melrose Avenue became – whatever. I created Melrose. Nobody went to Melrose. I forget his name. What's the guys who does pants? Fred Segal. He was the first one to come in. When he came in to meet me he said, "How're you doin'?" I said, "Why are you opening a clothing store around here?" Because there were all these little shops. It was a Jewish neighborhood. There was a deli across the street, and a grocery store, and there was a drugstore on the corner owned by in-law relatives of my brother's – my older brother's wife's uncles owned it, ran the drugstore. It was just a real quiet place. There was nothing fancy about it. So then this guy opened up this sort of, in a way, blockbuster thing a half a block away. And he said, "I'm going to sell your customers pants." And he did. (laughs) He was very friendly. One time I spoke to him

– I can't remember what it was. It was a while back. He had occasion to call and then took the phone, and the first thing he said I'm so happy to hear from you, and so on.

Anyway.

VC: Do you want to stop it?

EP: Yeah.

Ed Pearl

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